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The Big Lie – How to Enslave the World

“And the lie has, in fact, led us so far away from a normal society that you cannot even orient yourself any longer; in its dense, gray fog not even one pillar can be seen.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago

Lying has always been used for political purposes. Lies cover up corruption, past mistakes and hidden motives, and they are an essential ingredient in political campaigning. Sometimes, however, political lies take on a much more sinister form. The lies become all-encompassing, embrace all aspects of life and infect every corner of society. This occurrence is a sign that totalitarianism may be rising. For as the political philosopher Hannah Arendt noted, totalitarianism, at its essence, is an attempt at “transforming reality into fiction”. It is the attempt of corrupt and pathological state actors to impose a fictional account of the world onto the entire population. In Nazi Germany it was the idea of a superior race and an unclean people that formed the big lie, in the Soviet Union it was the belief that state communism could work and that all could be made equal. And from this big lie trickled down a stream of endless little lies. Referring to Communist Russia, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote:

“In our country the lie has become not just a moral category but a pillar of the State.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Oak and the Calf

Describing Czechoslovakia under Soviet rule, Vaclav Havel similarly explained:

“...life in the system is so thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies...Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

When a political system rests upon a bed of lies, what can be done to turn the tide back towards truth and freedom? In this video, drawing from the insights of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Vaclav Havel, we are going to explore this question.

The day before he was exiled from the Soviet Union, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published a short essay titled *Live Not By Lies*, and in it he wrote:

“We are approaching the brink; already a universal spiritual demise is upon us; a physical one is about to flare up and engulf us and our children, while we continue to smile sheepishly and babble: “But what can we do to stop it? We haven’t the strength.”...But we can do—everything!—even if we comfort and lie to ourselves that this is not so. It is not “they” who are guilty of everything, but we ourselves, only we!”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Live Not By Lies

When a state turns totalitarian the individuals who live in these societies are not merely its victims. All the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century rose to power amidst thunderous applause as many citizens openly called for the brutal control that defines this form of rule. Without mass support and compliance the great minority in the ruling class would be but paper tigers. The responsibility for the oppression, suffering, and loss of life that comes in the wake of totalitarianism, therefore, cannot be placed exclusively on politicians and bureaucrats. A large portion of responsibility must be placed on the citizens who support this form of rule, or else do nothing to resist. Vaclav Havel explains in his book *The Power of the Powerless*:

“There is obviously something in human beings which responds to this [totalitarian] system... Human beings are compelled to live within a lie, but they can be compelled to do so only because they are in fact capable of living in this way. Therefore not only does the system alienate humanity, but at the same time alienated humanity supports this system as its own involuntary masterplan, as a degenerate image of its own degeneration, as a record of people’s own failure as individuals.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

If the fuel for the growth of totalitarianism is weak and fearful individuals, then a cure is a personal revolution that takes place in hearts and minds and leads to an awakening of self-responsibility, courage and strength.

“The best resistance to totalitarianism is simply to drive it out of our own souls, our own circumstances, our own land, to drive it out of contemporary humankind.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s writings played a major role in toppling the Communist Soviet Empire, and he advised we engage in such a personal revolution by transforming our life in a way which targets the most vulnerable part of the totalitarian system – the lies upon which it is built. In *Live Not by Lies*, Solzhenitsyn explains:

“And therein we find, neglected by us, the simplest, the most accessible key to our liberation: a personal nonparticipation in lies! Even if all is covered by lies, even if all is under their rule, let us resist in the smallest way: Let their rule hold not through me!”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Live Not By Lies

Vaclav Havel was a dissident in communist Czechoslovakia and he later became president, and he echoed Solzhenitsyn’s sentiment that the most effective key to liberation from totalitarian rule is to commit to a nonparticipation in lies. Havel called this commitment “living within the truth”.

“If the main pillar of the [totalitarian] system is living a lie, then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth. This is why [the truth] must be suppressed more severely than anything else.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

To engage in a nonparticipation in lies, or in Havel’s terminology, to “live within the truth”, is to stop parroting the lies of the state and to refrain from acting in ways which conform to state propaganda. It is to resolve to live as freely and authentically as possible, to boldly express our individuality and spontaneity.

“...spontaneity with its incalculability, is the greatest of all obstacles to total domination over man.”

Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism

It is to follow our conscience and place morality above unjust laws, to fearlessly pursue personal and communal values, and to give voice to our thoughts undeterred by ridicule. To live within the truth is to act in ways which promote a cultural reawakening, thus serving as a counterforce to the totalitarian system’s coercive march towards cultural stagnation, suffering, and death.

“Our way must be: Never knowingly support lies!”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Live Not By Lies

In communist Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Revolution, or non-violent fall of totalitarianism, according to Havel, depended not so much upon political reform, but upon the existence of growing numbers of:

“...individuals who were willing to live within the truth, even when things were at their worst. . .They could equally have been poets, painters, musicians, or simply ordinary citizens who were able to maintain their human dignity...One thing, however, seems clear: the attempt at political reform was not the cause of society’s reawakening, but rather the final outcome of that reawakening.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

As an example of how living within the truth can revitalize a society, Havel recounts the story of a rock band, The Plastic People of the Universe. In communist Czechoslovakia musicians were required to register with authorities and were banned from creating music deemed too provocative or threatening to the political system. The Plastic People of the Universe refused to toe the line and following a concert in 1976 they were arrested, and the ensuing trial gained enormous public interest. The state media branded the band members as drug addicts, mentally ill, extremists and traitors to the country. However, many of the citizens had grown tired of living within a lie and they supported the young musicians, and as Havel notes, in many respects the trial marked the beginning of the end of the totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia. Havel writes:

“[The Plastic People of the Universe] were unknown young people who wanted no more than to be able to live within the truth, to play the music they enjoyed. . .and to live freely in dignity and partnership...They had been given every opportunity to adapt to the status quo, to accept the principles of living within a lie and thus to enjoy life undisturbed by the authorities. Yet they decided on a different course...In some ways the trial was the final straw...People...came to realize that not standing up for the freedom of others...meant surrendering one’s own freedom.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

Along with demonstrating the real-world impact that can result from the actions of ordinary individuals who live within the truth, that a young rock band sparked a movement that toppled the totalitarian system in

Czechoslovakia unveils an important but underappreciated characteristic of this type of political system: despite appearances, it is by its nature weak, brittle, and in need of constant infusions of fear and lies in order to prevent it from collapsing. This weakness is why totalitarian regimes constantly slander and persecute anyone, even harmless musicians, who engage in even a modest attempt to live within the truth. For truth is the primary enemy of totalitarianism as it erodes the foundation of lies upon which it is built. Havel explains:

“...the crust presented by the life of lies is made of strange stuff. As long as it seals off hermetically the entire society, it appears to be made of stone. But the moment someone breaks through in one place, when one person cries out, ‘The emperor is naked!’ – when a single person breaks the rules of the [totalitarian] game, thus exposing it as a game – everything suddenly appears in another light and the whole crust seems then to be made of a tissue on the point of tearing and disintegrating uncontrollably.”

Václav Havel, The Power of the Powerless

The brittleness of the totalitarian system is also why it is so important for as many people as possible to stop being servants to state lies. For just as our failure as individuals fuels the totalitarian system, so too it is a renewed courage of individuals to live within the truth which weakens and eventually destroys it. Totalitarian systems condition their citizens to believe that the individual is powerless to effectuate social and political change; but history has repeatedly shown otherwise, and as Solzhenitsyn notes:

“One man who stopped lying could bring down a tyranny.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago

What we choose to say and how we decide to act influences not just the state of our character, but the state of society. We make our own epoch. And when living in the midst of totalitarian rule, the fundamental choice to make is whether we are going to stand on the side of the truth and freedom, or on the side of lies and malevolent authority. For those who choose the latter, whether out of fear, apathy, or merely to take the path of least resistance, Solzhenitsyn had to the following to say:

“Let him not brag of his progressive views, boast of his status as an academician or a recognized artist, a distinguished citizen or general. Let him say to himself plainly: I am cattle, I am a coward, I seek only warmth and to eat my fill.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Live Not By Lies